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Volunteers in the Courts News

Winter 2003

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Dodge County gets restorative justice grant

A new restorative justice program in Dodge County has received a \$55,000 grant from the Office of Justice Assistance. "This grant means that we will be able to get this program off the ground and demonstrate for the people of Dodge County that justice can be enhanced by involving not only the offender, but also the victim and the community as well," said Sandra Kaul, president of Restorative Justice for Dodge County, Inc.

Dodge County started organizing its restorative justice program in spring 2002 after learning about similar programs in other counties. Judges Andrew P. Bissonnette, Daniel W. Klossner, and John R. Storck have helped to lead the effort. "Once I heard about restorative justice and what impact it was having in other Wisconsin communities, I knew that we needed to bring it to Dodge County to benefit our citizens as well," Bissonnette said. "Restorative justice programs leave victims feeling safer and more satisfied, while reducing recidivism for young offenders."

The program's first focus will be mediation in cases involving first-time, non-violent juvenile offenders. These mediations bring together victims and offenders for a face-to-face meeting designed to promote accountability and bring closure. Generally, these mediations lead to a signed agreement stating what the offender will do to make the victim whole.

After the mediation project is established, the group plans to expand to victim impact panels, which are designed to give offenders an up-close look at the devastation that can result from drunk driving. Victims spend about an hour relating their stories as offenders listen. According to an Outagamie County study, 14.7 percent of offenders who attended a victim impact panel committed another drunk driving offense; the recidivism rate among those who did not attend was 36.4 percent.

Though not yet underway, the restorative justice program has tremendous support from the community, Kaul said. The board includes members from the Dodge County Sheriff's Office, the District Attorney's Office, Probation and

Parole, the Partnership to Address Violence through Education (PAVE), Dodge County Human Services, the Dodge County Board, and local clergy.

The staff of Barron County Restorative Justice will provide training for volunteers. That program started in 1999, also with funding through the Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance. Chief Judge Edward R. Brunner, Barron County Circuit Court, initially organized the effort and then turned over operations to a nine-member volunteer board to encourage community support and ownership. "Barron County has been our mentor through this," said Kaul. "They have been wonderful in guiding us."

The Dodge County project is currently screening applicants for the position of director and hopes to have someone selected by the end of February. The director's first duty will be to recruit volunteers.

For more information contact Kaul at (920) 386-3805.

New database helps modest-means people find lawyers

During the year 2000, according to the Wisconsin Pro Se Working Group, about 30 percent of the family court cases, 60 percent of CHIPS cases, and 90 percent of small claims cases filed in Waukesha County involved at least one self-represented litigant.

Judge Michael O. Bohren was brand new on the bench in Waukesha County in 2000, and was struck by the number of pro se litigants. Less than a year later, having noted that many litigants wanted representation but did not believe they could afford it, he formulated an idea for a database of attorneys willing to either work *pro bono* or provide unbundled legal services.

The first step was updating a 15-year-old list of attorneys willing to take pro bono cases. Bohren contacted the Waukesha County Bar, where he found interest, but no funds; he turned next to the State Bar of Wisconsin. The State Bar's Project Pro Bono devoted a staff person to the effort and mailed out letters from Bohren on State Bar letterhead with return postcards to the approximately 600 attorneys in Waukesha County. The letter explained the effort and the postcard gave the lawyers an opportunity to volunteer to:

- Represent criminal defendants of modest means
- Accept court appointments to represent criminal defendants.
- Accept referrals in family and civil matters.
- Participate in TEAM PRO BONO project cases (TEAM PRO BONO takes civil and family cases referred by Legal Action of Wisconsin's Volunteer Lawyer Project).

Only about 50 of those 600 cards came back, but Bohren is already expanding

the group by speaking to new lawyers as he meets them in the courthouse and encouraging them to participate. The group has grown to about 60, and he hopes to work with the county bar to boost that number by including the postcard in renewal-notice mailings.

The list of lawyers can be accessed and edited by every judge and the Clerk of Circuit Courts Office through an Intranet database that Bohren developed in cooperation with Clerk Carolyn Evenson. Bohren said he and his fellow judges use the database every day on the bench, entering geographic queries to find lawyers close to the person in need. Depending upon the situation, the judge then appoints the lawyer or prints the list for the litigant to make direct contact.

The database also provides information about the lawyers' language proficiencies; there are now lawyers on the list who are fluent in both Spanish and Hmong.

This effort is part of a broader commitment in Waukesha County to helping people who are representing themselves. In February 2002, a partnership of county court and administrative leaders, area judges, lawyers, and community organizations launched the Waukesha Court Self-Help Center, a multifaceted program designed to steer individuals without legal counsel through the court process (see The Third Branch, spring 2002). The center, located in the courthouse and open 8:15 a.m.-4:15 p.m. weekdays, guides Waukesha County residents who have already decided to represent themselves as well as those who remain undecided about whether to hire a lawyer. The center provides legal forms and instructions, information about the process, and access to computers and printers.
